NOV 18, 2020

The Tortured Mind of William Chester Minor

RUPERT TAYLOR

I've spent half a century (yikes) writing for radio and print—mostly print. I hope to be still tapping the keys as I take my last breath.

William Minor was the child of American missionaries in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Born in 1834, he grew up having what he called "lascivious thoughts" about girls. He later blamed these sexual fantasies as the beginning of his descent into madness. However, it seems more likely that his mental instability sprang from his time as an army surgeon during the American Civil War. He then spent much of his life researching the origin and meaning of English words.

Battle of the Wilderness

Having graduated from Yale with a degree in medicine, Minor joined the Union Army as a surgeon. May 1864 found him tending to the wounded coming from the Battle of the Wilderness.

The engagement took place in a heavily wooded area about halfway between Washington, D.C. and Richmond, Virginia. The Union side under Ulysses S. Grant heavily outnumbered the Confederate Army of Robert E. Lee; however the terrain favoured the rebels.

The battle was a savagely brutal affair with no obvious winner. Union Lieutenant Colonel Horace Porter wrote of the slaughter that "It was as though Christian men had turned to fiends, and hell itself had usurped the place of the earth."

The casualties were enormous; almost 18,000 Union soldiers and 11,000 Confederates. It was Minor's grim task to save those suffering grisly wounds by amputating limbs and digging out bullets without the benefit of anesthetics.

However, it seems to have been an incident involving a deserter that started the storm of mental health issues that haunted him for the rest of his life. An Irishman who had deserted was brought before Minor and the surgeon was ordered to brand the man with a "D" on his cheek.

The affair seems to have unhinged Minor and his mental health steadily declined. In 1868, he was judged to be "incapacitated by causes arising in the line of duty" and was invalided out of the army.

To Britain with Paranoia

In 1871, Minor moved the London, England and, with an army pension and family money, he was able to support himself. But, he was pursued by tempests of paranoia that centred on his belief that Irish men were trying to kill him.

Living in the slum of Lambeth, Minor barricaded himself in his rooms to keep his persecutors from entering. Despite this, he believed that a man called George Merrett had broken into his home. To settle this particular demon, Minor shot and killed Merrett while the latter was on his way to work.

It took little time for the justice system to find a verdict of not guilty by reason of insanity and Minor was locked away in the Broadmoor psychiatric hospital. The length of his incarceration was quaintly worded as "until Her Majesty's pleasure be known," which, in the case of Broadmoor inmates, often meant life, in the literal meaning of the word.

Thanks to his financial means, he was given reasonably comfortable quarters and was able acquire a considerable personal library of antiquarian books. So began the next phase of William Minor's life.

William Minor the Book Worm

In March 1879, Dr. James Murray began the monumental task of compiling *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). The concept of the project was that every English word was to be included and defined, and that each was to include a quotation to illustrate it. Murray and his team of editors realized they would need an army of volunteers to ferret out all the quotations needed to make the dictionary fully comprehensive.

In his Broadmoor cell, Minor learned about the call for helpers and set to the task with verve; that was probably in 1880. He started mining his library for quotations and began submitting them to the OED.

In his 1998 book, *The Professor and the Madman*, about the creation of the OED, Simon Winchester called his contributions to the dictionary the "defining feature" of Minor's life.

Over the next couple of decades, he became the most prolific provider of quotations to the dictionary, sometimes sending as many as 100 citations a week. The volume of submissions did not go unnoticed and the editors wondered who the mysterious contributor might be. He signed his missives Dr. W.C. Minor, Broadmoor, Crowthorne, Berkshire.

In 1915, *The Strand Magazine* published a story about how Murray ventured to Crowthorne, the village near which Broadmoor is located, in search of the enigmatic wood sleuth. The magazine described the encounter that is said to have occurred in 1897.

The story had Murray thinking he was going to encounter an erudite country gentleman as he arrived outside a large Victorian mansion. He was shown into the director's office where he was stunned to learn that Dr. W.C. Minor was an inmate of a mental hospital.

The *Strand*'s yarn, which needs to be taken with a shovelful of salt, gathered enormous public interest. It has been repeated many times; it's one of those stories that lives on despite most of it being untrue.

William Minor's Mental Decline

Murray did visit Minor, but it was in 1891 and he already knew about the man's condition. A friendship developed between the two men but Minor's mental health continued to spin downwards.

In 1902, Minor was suffering delusions that hearkened back to the sexual fantasies that disturbed him as a teenager. He believed he was being transported to Istanbul and forced to have sex with children. As a result he cut off his own penis.

Murray advocated for his release from Broadmoor, but he didn't get out until 1910. The order for his release was signed by the British Home Secretary at the time, Winston Churchill.

He was sent back to America where he was placed in a psychiatric hospital in Washington, D.C. There, he was diagnosed as schizophrenic. He was moved to a home for the elderly with mental illness where he died in 1920.

Bonus Factoids

- The painter Richard Dadd was held in Broadmoor psychiatric hospital while William Minor was there. Dadd was incarcerated after he killed his father, believing him to be the devil.

- The first complete edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* was completed and published in 1928. It had 15,490 pages in 10 volumes, and had definitions for 414,800 words and word forms. James Murray did not live to see the work finished; he died in 1915. The second edition was published in 1989 in 20 volumes with 21,730 pages. The number of word forms had expanded to 615,100. A third edition is scheduled to be published in 2037.

Sources

- "Battle of the Wilderness." *History.com*, August 21, 2018..

- "A Very Trusted Madman and The Oxford English Dictionary." Siobhan O'Shea, *Interesly*, April 10, 2019.

- "Broadmoor's Word Finder." *BBC*, undated.

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Comments

Rupert Taylor (author) from Waterloo, Ontario, Canada on November 19, 2020:

Thank you John and Ann. I'm done with tortured lives for a bit. I need to write something lighter in these dark days.

Ann Carr from SW England on November 19, 2020:

What a turbulent life Minor had! This is a fascinating account of someone who had such a varied life too. I was particularly interested to find out about the OED contributions. I suppose it focussed his mind well in Broadmoor; being there must have been a horror in itself if one didn't have a purpose.

Once again, you broaden our education, Rupert!

Ann

John Hansen from Gondwana Land on November 19, 2020:

This was another wonderful article, Rupert. Thank you for sharing the interesting but unfortunate life of Dr William Chester Minor.

Rupert Taylor (author) from Waterloo, Ontario, Canada on November 18, 2020:

Thank you Rodric.

Rodric Anthony Johnson from Surprise, Arizona on November 18, 2020:

Bravo! This article was my favorite thus far. It is an indication that people who have disabilities of any kind may find employ. I figure Minor is an exceptional person, however, despite the weakness he had. He helped to expand the English lexicon. I look forward to the 2037 edition.

I truly look forward to reading your articles.

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